

The French Canadian Missionary Society:  
ITS FIELD AND ITS WORK.



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# FRENCH CANADIAN MISSIONARY SOCIETY.

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## STATEMENT.

The French Canadian Missionary Society was formed in 1839, by the union of members of the various evangelical denominations in Montreal; receiving the cordial sympathy of leading ministers and laymen in Great Britain and on the Continent. It has ever since endeavoured to carry on the important object of its formation on the same catholic basis.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE FIELD.

The Society has its field of labor within the Province of Quebec; chiefly in the territory—about sixty miles in breadth, and over four hundred miles in length—through which flows the river St. Lawrence.

Colonized originally by the French, this territory contains a nearly un-mixed population of over a million Romanists; speaking the French language alone, and not much farther advanced in agriculture or education than they were a century ago. This state of things finds its explanation in the fact, that in the early settlement of the country the same thorough ecclesiastical system was introduced as then existed in France, and that it still exists with scarcely any modification. These early settlements are found divided into parishes, each with a priest entitled to collect by legal process tithes to the amount of a twenty-sixth of the cereal produce of the farm. He has also the power, with the consent of his churchwardens and congregation, (and these are generally powerless to hinder) to assess for the erection of churches and priests' residences: these rates becoming by law a mortgage on the farms. Unhappily, at the conquest by Britain, this system was continued by the Church of Rome being confirmed in the possession of her ancient rights and privileges. The result is that

the population of the province is under the control of a wealthy and organized hierarchy ; and is even more subservient to its spiritual leaders than the peasantry of France or Italy.

#### CHARACTER OF THE POPULATION.

Very little modification is produced by the existence of a Protestant element of about seventeen per cent. By the last census of 1871, the Protestants number 171, 666, mostly found in the Eastern Townships which were settled after the conquest,—and in the cities of Montreal and Quebec. Apart from these limits, the Protestant element in the Province is insignificant. Thus, while in the County of Huntingdon, there are 7,503 Romanists to 8,791 Protestants, and Brome and Shefford taken together have about 16,000 of each faith, on the other hand the whole range of river counties gives figures such as these : on the north side, Joliette County has over 22,000 Romanists to 400 Protestants ; the next County, Berthier, has nearly 20,000 to 150 ; Maskinonge 15,000 to 159 ; St. Maurice 11,000 to 79. On the south side of the river, beginning opposite Montreal, Laprairie County shows 11,500 to 357 ; Chambly 10,000 to 436 ; and in Vercheres the Roman Catholic population is actually 12,707 to 10 Protestants. Proceeding downwards, Yamaska gives 16,000 to 157 ; Nicolet 23,219 to 43 ; Lotbiniere 19,728 to 878 ; and Bellechasse has but 3 Protestants to 17,000 Romanists.

This picture of the counties is of course that also of the small towns and villages. The parish of Varennes—almost in sight of Montreal, contains 1,944 Romanists and 8 Protestants : while its village has but a single Protestant in its population of 561. Nearer still to the city, is the parish and village of Boucherville ; one having 1364 inhabitants, the other 769 ; and in neither of these is there a single Protestant. The parish of Belœil is twenty-one miles from Montreal : the population here is 1719 ; solidly Roman Catholic, with the exception of one person. These instances are given as specimens of the bulk of the country : the 17 per cent of Protestants being, as above stated, chiefly in one District and in the two larger cities.

#### CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE UNDER ROMANISM.

From these figures the condition of a French Canadian village, or country parish—can be easily understood. The church is the centre of its whole life. The local authorities are Romanist ; the doctor is a Romanist ; so is the notary ; so are the small traders. These, the persons of influence, are all dependent upon the good will of the priest ; who, having the power to injure, is seldom found slow to use it towards those who oppose the church's authority, either by denouncing them from the pulpit or by the quieter influence of the confessional.

Two things come now chiefly into view : one is the pressing need for some evangelical agency to act upon the spiritual ignorance and destitution of the people ; the other is the form which that agency must necessarily assume. The need consists partly in the unprogressive character of the civilization fostered by the priests ; an evil fraught with injury both to their people, to the Protestant minority, to the contiguous Provinces, and even to the United States. And there are the deeper issues flowing from the authoritative teaching of a faith, which makes void the commandment of God by the tradition of men ; which obscures

the tender love of God in the mission of His Son by interposing other mediators ; which blinds men to the sad facts of a sinful heart and its need of divine grace ; and which practically makes salvation the work of the priest, and not the gift of God. Some say "why disturb the people in their happy simplicity?" They are *not* happy. They are ground down by the demands of their clergy; they feel helpless in the grasp of the church. The priest, claiming the attribute of God, has the caprice and imperfections of a man ; still they are dependent on him for sacramental grace, for the forgiveness of their sins and the favour of their God. And always before them is the dread horror of Purgatory ; vague perhaps to the thoughtless and vicious, but an unspeakable agony to the more thoughtful and earnest. Surely there is need for those who know the glorious liberty of the Gospel, to send it to the darkened minds and burdened consciences of the French Canadian people.

#### THE REMEDY : ORDINARY METHODS UNAVAILABLE.

But how can this be done ? The exercise of an ordinary ministry and the formation of evangelical schools in such localities, and in the face of a hostile priesthood dominating the sentiment of such a community is at present out of the question. No one will dare to attend the public services, nor to send their children to such schools. It is, of course, to be distinctly remembered, that under the auspices of different denominations French Protestant churches and schools have been formed, and are exercising their legitimate influence on the Roman Catholic community ; but they are mostly located in the cities and towns, or in districts where there is already a Protestant population sufficiently numerous to render persecution difficult.

#### PURPOSE OF THE FRENCH CANADIAN MISSIONARY SOCIETY.

To meet the needs of the extensive districts which are not reached by these denominational efforts is the peculiar work of the French Canadian Missionary Society. It seeks to reach the adult population by the labors of Colporteurs ; and further, through their agency to induce parents to send their children to the Mission Schools, where they will be removed from priestly interference, and at the same time surrounded by the enlightening influences of a christian home. A few words on each of these branches of the Society's operations are now necessary.

#### COLPORTAGE.

For many years past, the Society has had in its employment from ten to sixteen Missionary agents visiting continuously from village to village, and from house to house. They are men of christian character, most of whom have had practical training for such labors on the Continent of Europe. These men are found to be especially suited for the humble but important work to which they have given themselves. Carrying with them the Scriptures, and religious books and tracts, they go quietly through the country offering them for sale, and especially seeking opportunity to read and explain the Word of God. Perhaps at night-fall some friendly farmer invites his neighbours to come and listen to the Colporteurs. In this way sometimes from ten to forty persons will assemble, and the Colporteur after reading the Scriptures will answer questions, discuss difficulties, and pray with the people. These exercises

varied by singing hymns, frequently last till late into the night, and result in the sale or loan of copies of the Scriptures, and in an awakening of thought and feeling which, under the blessing of God, has frequently been followed by permanent spiritual results. The good seed being thus sown with prayer, without noise or demonstration, and generally unknown to the priest, the Colporteur goes on his way. Through such work in the past, not only have individual souls been enlightened, but churches formed which are now gathered into and fostered by the Protestant denominations of the country. But an important effect of the Colporteur's labors is undoubtedly the gradual leavening of the popular mind with the ideas of christian liberty and privilege, of the spiritual character of true religion, and of the freeness of man's access to God through Jesus Christ. These ideas implanted in the minds of the people *must* result in their ultimately throwing off the priestly yoke and breaking away from Rome. Repeatedly and increasingly do the Colporteurs report the signs of such a movement. For instance, one writes :

#### EXTRACTS FROM COLPORTEURS' JOURNALS.

"In another place, when offering my books, I was told that if I waited till after mass, I should have a good opportunity. Soon twenty persons gathered around me, and I asked leave to read. The master of the house said 'Yes, but read us something good, or out you go.' I took my Bible and read a chapter ; not a word was spoken, and I read another. Then some one said, 'Please come near the door, we cannot hear out here.' I moved nearer and found that more than fifty persons were around the door listening. I read and spoke for two hours, when the priest sent a message to send me away. The master of the house said to me, 'This is your home ; whenever you pass here, call and give us a reading out of that beautiful book.' 'You will come home to me,' said another ; 'I want that book ; till now, I was afraid of it, as the priest says it comes from the devil, but now you have opened my eyes.' In another parish, nine Roman Catholics listened to the reading. Some said, 'We never thought Protestants had such a book.' Elsewhere I was told that four years ago I should have been sent out of the village, but now the people were doubting whether they were in the right path."

Another writes : "During this month we have had occasion to rejoice in the Lord for the facility we have found in circulating the Holy Scriptures—three Bibles, fifty Testaments, thirty Gospels."

"There is a spirit of enquiry which did not exist in former years. Many of the people are dissatisfied, and are desirous of obtaining light. The majority are ready to hear what we have to say, and listen to us telling the simple way of salvation as it is found in the Gospel. I have spoken to many persons during the past month in cottage-meetings, where many assembled to whom I could read the Word. Also in families, where all the members would crowd around and listen with marked attention, and ask numerous questions. Also to single individuals both men and women, in houses or on the highway, to whom I would offer the water of Life."

Another writer says :—"During the evening some thirty Roman Catholics assembled at the house, and till one in the morning I read and answered questions. A young man said, 'How is it that you Protestants are so sure of your salvation ; and say nothing about purgatory ?' I read to him the words of Jesus, saying that where He is, there shall his servants be. 'Well,' said he, 'I will read the Bible.' Another man came and said he had not expected a discourse of the kind he had heard : the priest told him not to come as he would be sure to hear bad words. He asked for some tracts, and promised to read them and ask the priest about them. Next day I visited sixteen Romanist families ; every one came to hear the Bible, and thanked me for it. At another place I had been reading the Bible in a neighborhood where a good work is going on ; about twenty three Romanists were present. A man brought a book which the priest had assured him contained the true way of salvation. I read from it this passage : 'He who prays constantly to the mother of God and his patron saint, and who confesses frequently, receives heaven for his merits.' I then took the Bible and read some things it says on these points. 'What then,' he cried, 'did the priest deceive me ?' 'It is even so,' I said. 'Well,' he said, 'from this time I will and must read the Bible for myself.' \*

\* \* I came to a phosphate mine. Many men were working at it ; I offered my

books, but was repulsed. One said, 'We have no time for reading here; work and get money is our motto.' 'Well, let me read you only one chapter.' I read, and the same man said, 'I refused to buy that book, for I was told that it was a Swiss book; now I know and will read it'. Last Sabbath at a meeting, nine Roman Catholics were present, and one asked me home to dine with him. I spent all the afternoon reading to the family. If you could only have seen the expression of these poor deluded people, hearing for the first time the Word of God, it would have paid for all past trouble."

Another colporteur reports :

"Many to whom I spoke of Jesus and the Gospel marvelled at what they heard, saying, 'We are getting almost persuaded that the priest leads us in a wrong way, and that you hold the truth in your hands; but we are afraid to come out openly, yet the time will come when we must leave the Church of Rome.' One man entered into a discussion about graven images, justifying their use in worship. I read to him the Second Commandment, trying to explain it. After a moment he said, 'You are right, and we ought not to have them at all.' A long conversation followed, in which he appeared convinced of the truth of the Gospel. Many are like him, and hundreds have more light than we are aware of. I believe thousands in our Lower Canada parishes are ready to leave Rome at the first opportunity. The majority seem much dissatisfied with the system, and say that some great stir must soon take place, when they will follow the Gospel."

#### SCRIPTURES CIRCULATED.

Chiefly through such labors there have been circulated since the Society's formation about 50,000 copies of the Scriptures in whole and in part; and considerably over half a million of religious publications small and large. Last year alone, the Society's agents distributed by sale and gift 3,300 copies of the Scriptures in whole or in part; and besides these 53,500 religious books and tracts. Part of this distribution was through the Montreal Depository; and the books embrace theological and educational works of literary and practical value. But there is need that what the Society is doing in this regard should be multiplied a hundred-fold.

#### MISSION SCHOOLS: RESULTS.

The educational work of the Society is carried on chiefly in its Mission Schools at Pointe-aux-Trembles near Montreal, where, since their institution, about 2,000 pupils have been educated. A large number of the young persons admitted are of Roman Catholic parentage, with a proportion of the children of converts. They are generally received for three Sessions, during which time they are thoroughly trained in the ordinary branches of education. But above all they are directed to the daily study of the Bible, and are led to contrast its teachings with the unscriptural dogmas of the Church of Rome. The duty of personal consecration to God, and of seeking the salvation of their countrymen, is constantly urged upon the pupils; and with blessed results; as witnessed by the many former pupils now engaged in various capacities in the Lord's vineyard; all of whom—when their desire was expressed—received every aid and encouragement in preparing for their future work. Of such laborers among their Roman Catholic countrymen, it is known that 18 have become preachers of the Gospel, 52 have been engaged in Colportage or other mission work, and 89 engaged as teachers: this last class including the female pupils. A rich blessing has always rested on these Mission Schools, even in immediate results. Nearly all the pupils eventually withdraw from Romanism; and not a Session passes without several conversions to Christ. Twelve gave their hearts to God last Session; sixteen were hopefully converted during the previous year; and signal evidence of the blessing of God has from year to year attended the

faithful christian work carried on at Pointe-aux-Trembles. Returning to their homes, or in various situations, the pupils exert an influence for good among their relatives and neighbours, and thus others are induced to send their children to the schools from the marked superiority of the education received there. In respect to the influence thus exerted, it may be stated that during the last few years thirteen families consisting of eighty-two souls, have been brought out of Romish error through the influence of children educated in our Mission Schools.

#### FINANCIAL POSITION AND PROSPECTS.

It remains briefly to state the position and prospects of the Society. The past year was one of trial. In an Appeal issued in April last, it was stated that the funds of the Society were in a most discouraging state; the Treasurer being then over \$6,500 in advance, while current expenses were increasing the deficit. It was also stated that at a Special General Meeting of the Society, it had been decided to call upon its friends to make strenuous efforts to place the income of the Society upon a basis equal to the efficient carrying on of the work; and at the same meeting the sale of certain properties not now needed was authorized. It may now be stated that since the General Meeting the heavy debt has by the latter action been nearly arranged for; and further, that the friends of the Society in Canada and Great Britain— including the Auxiliary Committees of Edinburgh and Glasgow, have manifested such sympathy and interest as to determine the Committee to continue their work, and again to place the claims of the Society before the christian public, trusting that its good work will not only be maintained but increased. Surely it behoves christians of every name to do what they can to sustain a work so proved by time, and so honoured of God as that of the French Canadian Missionary Society. Gratefully acknowledging the good hand of God in again freeing the Society from debt; and striving to maintain the faith and prayer with which they have hitherto carried on the work, the Committee ask the prayers also of christian friends; that there may be a plenteous effusion of the Holy Spirit upon all connected with it, upon the interesting people among whom they labour, and especially upon the priests that they also may be brought to the light and knowledge of the Gospel.

#### SUBSCRIPTIONS AND DONATIONS.

It is requested that all monies be remitted to the Treasurer, James Court, Esq., Montreal. Correspondence respecting the Mission Schools and work of the Society should be addressed to the Rev. Wm. Williams, General Secretary, Montreal.

In addition to ordinary subscriptions and donations, the funds may be specially aided, 1st, by subscriptions for SCHOLARSHIPS at Pointe-aux-Trembles; the board of each pupil for the Session costing at least \$40, but smaller amounts will be gratefully received and specially applied. This mode of advancing the cause is earnestly recommended to Sabbath Schools. Reports of the pupils will be sent during the Session. 2nd, by supporting a COLPORTEUR, which requires about \$500 per annum, including travelling expenses.

Remittances and correspondence in Great Britain can be addressed to Rev. R. T. Thomas, 82 Charlwood St. London, S. W.